

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE II-11

LOS ANGELES TIMES
1 FEBRUARY 1983

Credibility in an Incredible Affair

The Central Intelligence Agency has concluded that the Bulgarians knew of the attempted assassination of Pope John Paul II ahead of time, that they did nothing to stop it—but that neither the Bulgarians nor the Soviets instigated the attack.

The CIA assessment, disclosed Sunday by Times reporter Robert Toth, is reasonably plausible. But the obvious political convenience of the agency's explanation guarantees that not everybody will find it credible.

Twenty months have passed since the Pope was shot in St. Peter's Square by Mehmet Ali Agca, a Turkish terrorist and for-hire assassin. Investigation by the Italian authorities turned up the shocking fact that Agca had close connections with agents of the Bulgarian secret police.

Even by East European standards, Bulgaria is an unusually slavish satellite of the Soviet Union. Experts generally agree that if Bulgaria was involved in the attempt to kill the Pope, it could not conceivably have acted without the foreknowledge or active complicity of the Soviet KGB secret police.

Still more chilling, Soviet leader Yuri V. Andropov was the chief of the KGB at the time the attack occurred. So the theory of a runaway KGB is not very credible.

This is clearly a case where the pursuit of truth,

while necessary, could put an enormous strain on Moscow's relations with the West.

If the Soviet Union was proved or officially judged to be behind the shooting of the leader of world Roman Catholicism, it would become virtually impossible for President Reagan or any other major Western leader to meet with Andropov. In the atmosphere of anger and hostility that would exist, it would also become very difficult to negotiate new arms-control agreements, or to have them ratified if they were negotiated.

This would be an unsatisfactory, even dangerous, state of affairs in the Nuclear Age—one to be avoided so long as the facts allow.

It would be sheer speculation to say that the CIA deliberately came up with an explanation that would straddle the question and leave the way open for Reagan to meet with Andropov at the summit if progress in arms-control negotiations makes such a meeting desirable. But it is fair to say that the CIA assessment will have that effect unless the Italian authorities, who continue to pursue the investigation, come up with irrefutable evidence linking Moscow to the crime.

In that event, there would be no way for the United States and other Western powers to ignore the monstrous implications even if they wanted to.